

Virginia “The Duchess” Marmaduke: Journalism’s Royalty

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The Second World War played a crucial part in causing women to attain a more significant role in the workplace. With many of the nation’s men going overseas to take part in combat, job vacancies started surfacing left and right. It was up to many women to end their lives as homemakers and go out and support their families. Numerous “male” jobs such as doctors, factory workers, and journalists began to go to women. One of the women who saw this opportunity was Virginia Marmaduke, also known as “The Duchess.” Due to her fiery personality and animated nature, she went on to become one of the first female crime reporters in the city of Chicago. Marmaduke led the way for other women to follow in her footsteps to cover “hard news” and expose crime in Chicago at the time.

Marmaduke was born on June 21, 1908, in Carbondale, Illinois. At the age of ten, she and her family moved to Chicago, where she completed the majority of her primary and secondary schooling. She once recalled, “A teacher of mine told me I had a knack for writing and should develop it, so I told my father I wanted to be a newspaperman.” As a result, she attended the University of Iowa to study journalism. While attending, she met her future husband, Harold Grear, and in April 1930, they were wed. Marmaduke moved back South to Herrin with Grear, thus leaving her unable to complete her degree. There she held her first job writing for the *Herrin Daily Journal*. After she and her husband divorced, she went to Chicago to find work.

After fruitlessly applying for the *Daily News*, Marmaduke then applied for a job at the *Chicago Sun*, garnering an interview that would be recognized as a prime example of Marmaduke's spunky character. She had failed to mention the type of news that she wanted to cover on her application. When the editor asked her why, she said, "I didn't like the choices. I want the blood and guts and the sex and the greed. I want to cover it all." The editor ended up hiring her, and soon enough, Marmaduke's career began to take off. The editor also bestowed upon her the title "The Duchess," as Marmaduke was too much of a mouthful to yell across a newsroom, and because she already had a "duke" in her name.

The Duchess became the first woman in Chicago to have a sports byline, and in 1945 she hit it big, covering stories that focused on crime, two of which were similar to the infamous Black Dahlia murder case. After covering a story about Josephine Ross, a mother who was murdered in June of that year, she went on to cover a story about Suzanne Degnan, a six-year-old whose murder in 1946 was almost identical to that of the previous year. Suzanne had been "decapitated cleanly with either an ax or a cleaver," cut up in the same fashion as Ross. The Duchess had interviewed between 600 and 700 people, determined to get the scoop on "The Crime That Shocked Chicago." Through more investigations, police later discovered that a man named William Heirens had some link to the murder, and he was convicted. The Duchess got the opportunity to interview the parents of the killers, and felt much sympathy for the families on both sides. Marmaduke later allowed a crime magazine to publish the story of her first hand accounts. Marmaduke's feisty personality and experience gave her the courage to keep reporting such stories.

Aside from covering crime, she also had to cover a variety of shocking subjects, such as the casualties of a fire at the La Salle Hotel. She recalled that during the event she “would become nauseous, going to throw up in an alley across the street before returning to her post.” After having quit the *Sun-Times*, she then held her own radio and TV shows with the *Tribune*. Following her stint as a hostess for the New York World Fair in 1964, Marmaduke retired to Pickneyville, serving as Southern Illinois University’s official ambassador. She was also known for being around “a scoop of students, regaling them with her pavement-pounding stories and soupcon of pithy advice.” She died at the age of 93, in November 2001.

Though she was heralded as “the typical American Newspaper woman” by *This is Your Life*, Virginia Marmaduke’s devotion and involvement in her stories showed how concerned in them she was, and could really give her readers an up close and personal look at the lives of real people, a relief from the distant and sometimes cold journalism of the day. Her intimacy with her job, whether it was hard news or human interest, helped inspire others to not only get the facts, but get to know them as well. Aspiring female journalists have learned from her that you do not need to be a man to cover hard news, and you can approach such stories with compassion as well. She is remembered today for saying, “Remember: newspapering won’t make you into a millionaire, but it sure helps you live a full life.” [From K. C. Jaehnig, “‘The Duchess ’Virginia Marmaduke Dead at 93.” *Southern Illinoisan* Nov. 21, 2001; “Obituaries.” *Duquoin Evening Call* Jan. 4, 2002; and Cary O’dell, *Virginia Marmaduke*.]